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## A Chicken is Not a Bird, Is a Woman a Human Being? Intimate Partner Violence and the Russian Orthodox Church

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### Abstract

Although male-perpetrated intimate partner violence against women (IPVAW) is a global epidemic, research has suggested that Russian women are at a heightened risk of IPVAW compared to women in the West (Gondolf & Shestakov, 1997; Horne, 1999). The international battered women's movement has constructed issues of IPVAW as a public concern, highlighting the ways in which macro-level social structures and ideologies contribute to gender-based violence at the micro-level and influence community-based violence prevention and intervention efforts. The purpose of this paper is to theorize the potential impact of one such institution, the Russian Orthodox Church, in shaping Russian women's experiences of IPVAW. Implications for the development of services to address IPVAW within the Russian Orthodox community are examined.

*Keywords:* domestic violence, gender, intimate partner violence, religion, Russian Orthodox

### Introduction

Violence against women is an international epidemic. While violence against women in the global context encompasses a variety of acts, including battering, sexual assault, systematic rape as a weapon of war, female genital mutilation, forced prostitution, and sexual harassment, women around the world are most at risk of violence perpetrated by men they know, family members, and male intimate partners. Composite findings from every country in which large scale prevalence studies have been undertaken suggest that between 10% and 50% of women have been physically or sexually assaulted by an intimate partner at some point in their lives (World Health Organization, 2002). This suggests that male-perpetrated intimate partner violence against women (IPVAW) is a global public health concern.

In the Russian context, valid prevalence estimates of IPVAW have been historically difficult to obtain due to data suppression under the communist regime (Cubbins & Vannoy, 2005; Gondolf & Shestakov, 1997; Horne, 1999); however, emerging evidence suggests that IPVAW is a grave concern among Russian women. Data from the Moscow Health Survey, a large scale study of 1,190 individuals in Moscow, revealed that over one half (52.9%) of Russian women believed that intimate partner violence in Russia was a “serious problem” and that almost one in five men (18.6%) believed that violence against women was justified if a woman was found to be unfaithful to her partner (Stickley, Kislitsyna, Timofeeva, & Vagero, 2008). Further, it has been reported that women in Russia are four to five times more likely to experience intimate partner violence than women in the West (Horne, 1999) and that women in Russia are two and a half times more likely to be murdered at the hands of an intimate partner than women in the United States (Gondolf & Shestakov, 1997). This body of research suggests that, compared to women in the West, Russian women face a heightened vulnerability for IPVAW.

The international battered women’s movement has been pivotal in constructing issues of male-perpetrated IPVAW as a public concern, highlighting the ways in which macro-level gender inequalities contribute to the use of male violence against women at the micro-level. To understand the epidemic of IPVAW in Russia it is therefore necessary to examine the impact of social institutions on creating the conditions which contribute to IPVAW for Russian women, shape the meanings that women ascribe to violence in their lives, and influence the range of options available to survivors. The purpose of this theoretical paper is to examine the potential impact of one such institution, the Russian Orthodox Church, in shaping women’s experiences of IPVAW. Implications for the development of feminist services to address IPVAW within the Russian Orthodox community will be explored.

### Intersectionality and IPV against Russian Orthodox Women

Although numerous feminist theories have implications for understanding male-perpetrated IPVAW, two bodies of feminist work have historically dominated the discourse of the battered women’s movement. Radical feminist theories, that contend that patriarchy both causes and reinforces men’s use of violence as a means of maintaining gender hierarchy, have sought to universalize women’s experiences of male-perpetrated violence by highlighting the common vulnerability that all women face for such violence because of their gender. Liberal feminist theories, with an emphasis on the role of the state in not only tolerating but perpetuating

IPVAW through inadequate legal protections for survivors, have focused on increasing the criminal accountability of perpetrators and reducing the legal, social, and economic barriers that may keep women trapped in abusive relationships. While both radical and liberal feminist approaches have been fundamental in framing the public discourse on IPVAW as a social justice issue and drawing much needed attention to the victimization of women and girls, these approaches have increasingly been criticized for promoting a homogenized account of IPVAW that ignores important variations in women's experiences. In particular, post-colonial feminists, feminists from racialized communities, lesbian feminists, and anti-poverty activists have rejected the radical feminist notion of a "shared womanhood" approach to violence against women, highlighting the increased and differential vulnerability of women in socially, racially, and economically marginalized communities for violence based on their unique social positioning (see Sokoloff & Pratt, 2005). Further, the criminalization approach to IPVAW espoused by liberal feminists has been criticized as reflecting the priorities of white, economically privileged, heterosexual women in the West and ignoring the differing relationships of marginalized women with the state and the prison industrial complex (INCITE-Critical Resistance, 2005). For these reasons, feminist scholars have begun to call for the application and development of feminist intersectional theories specific to IPVAW (Bograd, 2005; Damant et al, 2008; Josephson, 2005).

Feminist intersectional frameworks have rejected the essentializing of women's experiences by highlighting the diversity among women based on their intersecting identities as members of multiply oppressed (and privileged) social categories (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Importantly, however, it has been argued that these frameworks have prioritized issues of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation as the primary organizing aspects of women's lives, often minimizing or discounting the confounding complexities of an array of women's other social identities and categorical memberships (Ludvig, 2006). In the IPVAW literature, recent decades have seen an increased visibility of the experiences of women of colour, lesbian women, differently-abled women, and poor women in shaping feminist discourses of violence and victimization from an intersectional framework. A consideration of women's experiences as members of faith communities and the implications of this membership on women's experiences of IPVAW has remained under-developed. When issues of religion and spirituality have been considered in the feminist literature on IPVAW, such accounts are often provided by women of Christian or Jewish faith in the North American context. The application of feminist theories to the experiences of women of the Russian Orthodox faith residing in post-communist

Russia, therefore, provides an important and necessary contribution to the literature.

### IPVAW and Faith Communities

While issues of religion and spirituality have historically been neglected in the feminist literature on IPVAW, recent empirical work has suggested that an understanding of the role of religion in the lives of women is important to the development of effective violence intervention services for women in faith-based communities. Research on the experiences of battered women has highlighted that religious and spiritual beliefs can serve as either a positive force or as a barrier for women in violent relationships. While some women report that their faith provided them with the strength to survive the violence and the motivation to terminate a violent relationship, other women reported that their religious beliefs were a source of great conflict to them as they attempted to ascribe meaning to their experiences and struggled to take active steps to protect themselves from violence (Pyles, 2007; Wendt, 2008). Certain interpretations of beliefs regarding the sanctity of marriage, the divine authority of men over the family, and the acceptance of suffering and endurance as necessary in individual lives, as an emulation of suffering of Christ, have been cited as common deterrents prohibiting women from actively questioning or challenging the inappropriateness of the use of violence by their partners (Wendt, 2008). As such, women's religious belief systems are an important determinant of their acceptance or rejection of the violence against them as well as their assessment of the range of options available to them to effectively cope with the aftermath of violence.

A consideration of the role of religious belief systems and the power of institutionalized religious doctrines to impact personal behavior is particularly salient in understanding women's experiences of IPVAW. Historical conceptualizations of IPVAW have focused primarily on physical and sexual violence; however, recent decades have seen an increased emphasis on the psychological, emotional, and spiritual aspects of IPVAW. A recognition that intimate partner violence is not only an attack on a woman's physical body but also her mind and spirit is central to a holistic understanding of violence against women. Spiritual abuse, which includes the misuse and abuse of religious doctrine as a means of maintaining male power and control in intimate relationships (including the use of religious doctrine as a justification for male violence), is increasingly being included by feminists and battered women's advocates as part of the matrix of power and control tactics that define IPVAW (e.g. Ontario Women's Directorate, 2006). As religious institutions are a

powerful force in shaping the individual ideologies, and behaviors, of their members, they provide a critical link in the eradication of IPVAW. Given the high rates of formal affiliation with the Russian Orthodox Church, with 79% of Russian women and 66% of Russian men identifying as followers of Russian Orthodoxy (Russian Public Opinion Research Center, 2008), understanding the ways in which Russian Orthodox doctrine may impact women's experiences of violence in the home is crucial for the construction of effective violence prevention and intervention efforts for this population of women.

### The Image and Role of Women in the Russian Orthodox Church

Religion has an essential effect on the development of any society by regulating religious norms and models of behavior for each person and for society as a whole. Religious doctrine serves as a basis for dominant ideologies, establishes priorities and values, predetermines gender roles, and influences the establishment of traditions, laws, and customs. Because religious teachings institutionalize a way of thinking and behaving for a people, they have direct relevance for understanding gender relations and, subsequently, IPVAW, at both the macro- and the micro-levels.

The Russian Orthodox Church is one of 15 independent Eastern Orthodox Christian Churches in the world. Eastern Orthodox Christian Churches have become consolidated by their common dogmas, basic religious canons and main laws, and through established principal devotions. Apart from these commonalities, all Eastern Orthodox Churches have established different rules and practices to accommodate regional variations in social circumstances and living conditions. These factors have discretely affected the social and political directions of the churches. This is particularly evident in the history of the Russian Orthodox Church (Kucher, 2004). After the Russian Revolution in 1917, the Russian Orthodox Church was criticized by the new government of the Bolsheviks as an opposition to the communist regime that propagandized in favour of atheism. After the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991, the period of revival of the Russian Orthodox Church began. Currently, the Russian Orthodox Church functions as the dominant religion in Russia. While there is an official separation of church and state, the Russian Orthodox Church is endorsed by the present government of Russia and receives support from it (Kaisch & Linzey, 1999). According to current public opinion polls, "Russians trust the Orthodox Church more than any other public institution, including law courts, trade unions, mass media, the military, the police, and the government" (Knox, 2005, p. 533).

The Russian Orthodox Church has had a tremendous influence on the development of gender ideologies in Russian society. Russian Orthodox doctrine prescribes distinct roles for men and women within the context of the church, family, and society based on a rigid conservative interpretation of biblical passages such as "Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord" (Eph. 5:22 New American Bible) and "But I want you to know that Christ is the head of every man, and a husband the head of his wife, and God the head of Christ" (I Cor. 11: 3). These interpretations not only support patriarchal family and social structures, they simultaneously reinforce both the celebration and degradation of women. On the one hand, Orthodox Christianity dignifies women by its veneration of the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ. All women are believed to embody the spirit of Mary and, as such, are to be exalted. On the other hand, women are believed to be powerful temptresses as evidenced through the story of Eve enticing Adam to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, precipitating their exile from the Garden of Eden (Engel, 2004; Ozhogova, 2005). As a result, there is a persistent suspicious and negative attitude towards women as symbols of original sin. The contradiction between woman as virgin mother and woman as sinful seductress forms the basis of a sexual double standard in church doctrine that justifies women's subordination and relegation to the domestic sphere.

The teachings of the Russian Orthodox Church have "condemned women as sinful – wanton, deceitful, instigator of lust and pollution to encourage men to fear and distrust women and to control their sexuality in order to protect the family from dishonor and society from disorder" (Engel, 2004, p. 9). Orthodoxy emphasizes conservative attitudes towards women and supports gender segregation, resulting in women's designation to a secondary position within the Church. By extension, women are assigned an inferior position within the family and society as man's servant. As such, the main duty of a woman is obedience to her husband (Col. 3:18; I Cor. 11:3, 5, 7-10; Eph. 5:22-24; Eph. 5:33). Literal interpretation of the Biblical texts as a divine dictum that a wife must serve her husband and obey him unconditionally, used by Russian Orthodox clergy, creates an oppressive environment for women that is intensified by fixed duties in family life. The priest and Director of the Diocesan School of Orthodox catechesis and the church pedagogy of St. Sergius Radonezhskiy Anatoly Garmayev points out "The duty of the wife is to honor and respect her husband. ... The next duty of the wife is to be submissive to her husband. After all, submissive to her husband - so, revering him" (Garmayev, 2008, ¶¶14, 20). Archimandrite Alipy Voronov (2003) emphasizes the central role of wives as the assistants of their husbands whose primary responsibility is to bring up children in the fear

of God. Only women who understand this divine mandate are good mothers and wives. Voronov (2003) also emphasizes that if the husband has weaknesses, for example alcoholism, the wife should forgive her husband for this weakness, “because she herself is not without weaknesses. Whatever the husband, but he is the head of the house, he - the owner” (Voronov, 2003, ¶11). Orthodox women should obey and resign to their husbands (Drozdov, 1996) and accept with thanks any conditions that God creates for a woman, as stated by the priest and the member of the Committee of religious social work Igor Fomin (Efanova, 2008). Archpriest, the dean/presbyter of the Samarian Church of Sergija Radonezhskogo, Evgeniy Shestun emphasizes that the family exists only if a husband is the head of the family and the wife is afraid of him (Shestun, 2001). Thus, under Orthodoxy, fear, devotion, and obedience are prescribed in a hierarchal manner: a husband is afraid of God, a wife is afraid of her husband, and children respect and are afraid their parents.<sup>1</sup> In Orthodox families, this prescription is absolute. According to Shestun (2001), people do not choose these rules but are obliged to follow them. While not all men necessarily desire to be the head of the family nor do all women want to be restrained, they must commit to do so to please God. Women are expected not only to show deference and fear to their male partners to gain the Lord’s grace but are also expected to relinquish all decision-making authority to them as well. This dehumanization of women as objects for male control and possession is popularized in a common Russian proverb: “Chicken is not a bird, and the woman is not a human being.” Voronov (2003) writes: “You women should not take offense to this because a woman is not whole, but part of the whole. The part cannot be paramount ... The woman is a part, but not the head, the head of a husband” (Voronov, 2003, ¶9).

In addition to designating clear social roles for men and women, the Russian Orthodox Church makes prescriptions for the sexual relations between them. These beliefs play an important role in understanding both women’s subordinate position within the church and the proliferation of misogyny within the Russian Orthodox faith. Indeed, some scholars have identified religious dictums regarding the sexual relations between men and women as “the most deep-seated cause of men’s negative attitudes toward women” (Holm, 1994, p. xiv). Although the church blesses sexual relations between husband and wife as essential for reproduction many of the most influential writings about sexuality within the Russian Orthodox faith were written by Church Fathers and Orthodox Monks who had

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<sup>1</sup> In the canonical text of the Bible translated into Russian, the word “boyatsia” is used, which means “to be afraid of” (Eph. 5:33 Russian Biblical Society).

undertaken vows of celibacy, such as Jerome, Tertullian, Augustine, and Sylvester. It has been argued that these religious leaders projected their anxiety and fears about their own sexuality onto women in their spiritual writings and teaching, reinforcing not only a patriarchal but misogynistic view of female sexuality (Drure, 1994). As prominent church leaders, their attitudes about women and sexuality strongly influenced the Church's position on questions about morality, resulting in the exaltation of ascetics and ascetic behavior. Because the main thing in marriage is spiritual unification but not sexual contact, sexual relations, even within marriage, were considered "dirty" and a sin, but also a necessary evil for procreation purposes (Drozdov, 1996; Moroz, 2006). Priests stress that spouses who live in high, pious marriages should have sex only to conceive a new life. If spouses decide not to have more children, they should continue to live as brother and sister, without sexual contact (Shestun, 2006).

Sexual ideologies within the Russian Orthodox faith encompass not only a belief system that reinforces a fear of female sexuality (and, by extension, femaleness itself) but also behavioural proscriptions governing sexual contact between husband and wife, such as prohibition of sexual contact on Wednesdays, Fridays, Sundays, holidays, and during fasts (four times a year for 20-40 days) (Balashov, 2009; Gumerov, 2009; Korobkov, 2009; Reidman, 2009). It is further advised that couples abstain from sexual contact during the whole period of pregnancy (Korobkov, 2009; Moscow State University, 2007). Sex and sexual relations are linked to the female nature, and women's biological nature is considered to be the foundation for women's inferiority within the church and, by extension, society as a whole. Female sexuality, as Holm (1994) writes, "relates on the one hand to menstruation and child birth, and on the other hand to myths about women's sexual nature" (p. xiv). Women's nature, and particularly inherent uncleanness, is used as justification for limiting women's roles within the Church. Women are prohibited from attending church during their menstruation, and they have a 40-day confinement period after childbirth known as the 'period of purification' during which time it is taboo for them to enter the church (Holy Dormition Pskov-Caves Monastery, n.d.). As a consequence of this period of purification, women cannot attend the baptism of their own child that, in compliance with the tradition, should be before this 40-day period is completed.

Beliefs regarding women's uncleanness within the Russian Orthodox Church were historically based on the Jewish tradition and the Scripture (Lev. 12:2-5). Later, however, during Christianization, some Jewish laws regarding women's nature were altered, and these changes were affirmed by the decisions of Church Councils. For example, the



limitation of women's participation in church activities during menstruation was regulated by rules of the VI Ecumenical Council in Constantinople in 691-692 (Krotov, n.d.). Despite changes that dictated that the only restriction for women was that they were not allowed to take communion during this time, Orthodox Christian tradition not only continued with prohibitions for women but further extended and toughened the rules governing women's access to the church during times of "uncleanliness." There is a strong, prevalent opinion among Russian Orthodox believers that women are not allowed to even enter into churches during this period, nor are they permitted to touch icons and other sacred objects. Although these practices persist in Orthodox faith, it is important to note that these rules do not have any theological foundation but, rather, are based on secular prejudice (Lorgus, 2005).

The failure to recognize women as equal human beings, with distinct identities separate from their husbands, has defined the Russian Orthodox Church from the beginning of its history and persists today. As a result, women's experiences and knowledge have been commonly ignored within the Russian Orthodox faith. Women's views are often characterized "as marginal, frightening, or dangerous, or as superstition rather than real religion" (Franzmann, 2000, p. 72). Women's contributions to the establishment and improvement of the norms, laws, and principles of the Russian Orthodox faith have been minimal and have not had an essential influence on religious life. As such, women's identity within the Russian Orthodox Church has been defined by a patriarchal religious doctrine which not only views them as subordinate to their male counterpart but devoid of free will, autonomy, and independence. The Church's characterization of women as the servants of men not only influences the development of individual attitudes that support men's use of violence against women but have also impacted the status of women in Russian society as a whole.

### Women's Rights in Soviet Russia

The historical relationships between women's social status, Russian Orthodoxy, and secular law have been complex. After the Russian Revolution in 1917, the position of women in Russia, which was renamed to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), was substantially altered. Although women had been historically oppressed in Russian society, the liberty of women was an important part of the politics of the Soviet state. The Bolsheviks sought to "transform traditional patterns of gender relations in order to consolidate its rule" (Ashwin, 2000, p. 1). During the next several years, the Bolsheviks passed several new laws that assured women the same civic rights and freedoms as men,

essentially equalizing gender relations under the law (All-Russia Congress of Soviets, 1918; Congress of Soviets of the USSR, 1936; Council of People's Commissars of the RSFSR, 1918). Women were allowed to choose their profession and education, place of employment, and residence, and were entitled to the same salary as men. Further, women received equal obligations and benefits in marriage and divorce for the first time in history. Nevertheless, the gender "equality" under the law did not manifest itself as "equality" in the domestic sphere. During the Soviet regime, women had a substantial and essential role in the labour force; however, they were commonly relegated into unskilled and low paying jobs because men often refused to do these jobs. At the same time, women continued to have obligations to do domestic duties: cooking, cleaning, laundry, and childcare. Soviet propaganda aimed to encourage women to see themselves first of all as mothers: "Motherhood, promoted as the highest expression of femininity, was defined not merely as the care of children but also as the physical and emotional support of men" (Bridger, 1996, p. 243). Thus, although women were "liberated" in theory under communism, the degree to which women's experiences equaled those of men was minimal.

As the power and autonomy of the church threatened Bolshevik rule, the new communist government instituted a policy of militant atheism (Marsh, 2005). During this period, there was a proliferation of anti-religious propaganda sanctioned by the government, and church property was commonly seized. As a result, the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church over the daily lives of individuals was greatly minimized during this period of government-imposed secularization. The repression of Russian Orthodoxy and its rigid ideologies regarding the proper role of women in society, coupled with new legal freedoms for women under communist rule, resulted in a complex and contradictory situation for women in Russia. Although they were technically equal to men under the law, hegemonic glorification of women's primary role as wife and mother was largely untouched. Now, however, it was expected that women complete these roles while simultaneously participating with men in the public labor market.

### Gender in Contemporary Russian Family and Society

The relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church and secular law, and its impact on women's status in society, has changed significantly over the last twenty years. During the period of glasnost under Mikhail Gorbachev, religious suppression and persecution in Russia came to an end, ushering in a new period of religious revitalization (Marsh, 2005). In 1988, Gorbachev granted the Russian Orthodox Church status as a

“legitimate public institution,” a status that was solidified further in 1990 as the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Belief which legalized the separation of church and state in Russia (Marsh, 2005). In conjunction with a period of intense nationalism following the collapse of the USSR and concerns regarding the new presence of western religions in Russia that were feared to threaten this nationalism, the Russian government passed a new law in 1997 that privileged Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism as the traditional religions of Russia and granted them special recognition and privileges under the law (Marsh, 2005; Walters, 2007). As a result, it has been argued that “the Russian Orthodox Church has resumed its place at the center of Russian culture” (Jarvik, 2006, p. 166).

Although there is an official separation of church and state, the Russian government informally endorses the Russian Orthodox Church in the name of Russian nationalism. As noted by President Putin in 2005,

One should not completely draw a line between the culture and the church. Of course, by law in our country the church is separate from the state, but in the soul and history of our people it's all together. It always has been and it always will be” (Putin as cited in Jarvik, 2006, p. 172).

Putin echoed this message on the tenth anniversary of Patriarch Aleksii II's election when he celebrated the Russian Orthodox Church's “enormous role in the spiritual unification of the Russian land after many years of life without faith, moral degradation, and atheism” (Putin as cited in Knox, 2005, p. 542). Putin has also been vocal in publicly acknowledging the Russian Orthodox Church as “a key force in promoting social stability and moral unity around general moral priorities of justice, patriotism, good works, constructive labor, and family values” (Putin as cited in Knox 2005, p. 543). The power of the church is so great that even those in Russia who do not identify as Russian Orthodox commonly report high levels of trust in the church, with over one third (36.3%) of “nonreligious” Russians reporting that they believe that the Russian Orthodox church provides answers to people's moral and spiritual problems (Marsh, 2005).

Although women currently have equality under secular law in Russia, the powerful influence of the Russian Orthodox Church, whose doctrine continues to support the inferiority of women, creates a social paradox for Russian women. While they are technically protected under the law, their social status compared to men remains quite low. After the fall of communism, Russian men wanted to completely reinstate their patriarchal position in society and to restore their status as a ‘head’ and

‘master’ of the family, positions that they believed had been denied to them under communism (Attwood, 1996). This, coupled with a religious renaissance in the post communist era and the re-emergence of the Russian Orthodox Church as a pivotal institution in Russian society, resulted in a renewed emphasis on the domestic role of women as wife and mother propagated by the Russian mass media, press, movies, and advertisements. Contemporary Russian society sees the chief role of the woman as a wife-mother and only secondarily as a worker (Attwood, 1996).

To further reinforce traditional family formations, and by extension male authority over women in the domestic sphere, the government of Russia has instituted massive cuts to several family support programs to re-affirm the family as a “private” institution. Despite the generous maternity promotion policies to encourage women to procreate, the government has largely relinquished its responsibility for the material care of women and children, thus reinforcing their economic dependency on men (Cubbins & Vannoy, 2005). Child benefits are small and are generally insufficient for the support of even one child, much less multiple children. Many publicly funded daycare centers and kindergartens have been closed or become private. Further, severe housing shortages in Russia dictate that many people do not own their property and communal living arrangements, by necessity, are common (Horne, 1999; Stickley, Tiofeeva, & Sparen, 2008). As “public” support for the long-term economic well-being of families diminished in the post-communist era, the family was recreated as a private institution, a process which “undermined the independence of women within the reproductive sphere” (Ashwin, 2000, pp. 19-20). This reconstruction of the family as a private patriarchal institution as a consequence of both Russian social policy and the re-emergence of the Russian Orthodox Church after the collapse of the USSR provides a vital backdrop for understanding violence against Russian Orthodox women.

#### IPVAW in Russia

Although it is not possible to determine if there have been shifts in the prevalence of IPVAW in Russia since the fall of communism, as data suppression under the communist regime prohibited the collection of, and disclosure of, such statistics, it is commonly believed that women in Russia are at a heightened risk of intimate partner victimization compared to women in the West (Gondolf & Shestakov, 1997; Horne, 1999). Current statistics suggest that approximately 36,000 Russian women are physically victimized at the hands of their intimate partner on a daily basis and that 79% of married women in Russia have experienced

physical abuse by their partners during their marriage (Fedorova, 2005). While these figures are alarmingly high, it is commonly believed that they underestimate the true scope of IPVAW in Russia (Fedorova, 2005).

The widespread nature of intimate partner violence in Russia is intrinsically linked to the macro-level contexts in which such violence occurs. "Attempts to return women to a more domestic mode of life, and the proliferation of images of violence against women which abound on cinema screens and in the press, can be seen as two sides of the same coin: this could be termed the aggressive re-masculinization of post-Soviet Russia" (Attwood, 1996, p. 259). The masculinization of Russian society, coupled with the lack of legal infrastructure to adequately handle reported cases of IPVAW, have resulted in most instances of intimate partner violence remaining unreported to police (Benninger-Budel & O'Hanlon, 2004). IPVAW in Russia is illegal under the Russian criminal code; however, it is dealt with under "general assault" provisions, as opposed to separate legal provisions specifically governing violence against women by their intimate partners (Crandall, Senturia, Sullivan, & Shiu-Thornton, 2005; Fedorova, 2005). When cases of IPVAW are reported to the militia, the issue is often referred back to the family to address as a private matter (Horne, 1999; Stickley et al., 2008; Stickly, Timofeeva, & Sparen, 2008). Even though women have the right to file reports of IPVAW with the militia, the militia has "the right to refuse complaints and reject cases for prosecution if they believe they cannot be won" (Horne, 1999, p. 58). It has also been documented that, in the rare case that militia does accept reports from victims, barriers in the legal system commonly prevent successful prosecution (Horne, 1999).

The climate of social acceptance in Russia that allows violence against women by their intimate partners to remain largely unchallenged has been heavily influenced by the traditions and principles of the Russian Orthodox Church. The Church's construction of the family as a private patriarchal institution contributes to the prevailing opinion of Russians that IPVAW is a private matter and should be solved within the family. The re-emergence of the Russian Orthodox Church, and its endorsement by the Russian government as important for nationalism, has also further solidified cultural endorsement of traditional gender ideologies that support male dominance and female submissiveness. Indeed, research on attitudes towards gender traditionalism in the United States and Russia suggest that Russians are more likely to believe in differentiated gender roles rooted in biological essentialism (a central tenet of Russian Orthodox teachings) and that Russian men envision little likelihood of ever changing such arrangements (Henderson-King & Zhermer, 2003). Such attitudes, for some men, serve to normalize IPVAW and contribute to the blaming of victims for the violence inflicted

upon them (Stickley, Timofeevaa, & Sparen, 2008). Indeed, research on attitudes about IPVAW in Russia has suggested that there are several situations in which a man is believed to be justified for perpetrating violence against his partner (Stickley et al, 2008). The common cultural acceptance of IPVAW is further evidenced in several popular Russian proverbs such as “Beat the wife for better cabbage soup” (Cubbins & Vannoy, 2005), “A beating man is a loving man” (Benninger-Budel & O’Hanlon, 2004), and “A woman falls down from a carriage, it becomes easier for a horse” (World Sayings, 2009).

### Implications for Social Services

A focus on the role of religion and spirituality in the lives of survivors of IPVAW is essential for the development of services for battered women from a feminist intersectional perspective. Research with women from diverse religious and spiritual orientations has suggested, however, that traditional approaches to feminist practice tend to treat all women of a particular faith or religious tradition as a homogenous group, ignoring important within-group variations among women of a shared faith (Gentlewarrior, Martin-Jearld, Skok & Sweetster, 2008). Qualitative research with Christian women in violent relationships has demonstrated that women’s personal sense of Christian identity differentially shaped the meanings they ascribed to violence and to their chosen strategies for addressing the violence in their lives (Pyles, 2007; Wendt, 2008).

In developing services for women of Russian Orthodox faith who are experiencing intimate partner violence, from a feminist intersectional perspective, it is imperative that organizations use an individualized approach to assessment and intervention that does not assume that all women share a common internalized belief system. Given that the overwhelming majority of women in Russia identify as Russian Orthodox, the degree to which women adhere to the tenets of orthodoxy may vary considerably among women with a formal affiliation with the Russian Orthodox Church. For example, research conducted by Rose (2002) on the religious commitment of followers of Russian Orthodoxy in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan found significant variation in adherence to the precepts of Orthodoxy. In Kazakhstan, 37% of individuals who identify as being of Russian Orthodox faith report ignoring religious rules, while 56% of followers attempt to follow religious law “some, but not all” of the time (Rose, 2002). Similarly, in Kyrgyzstan, 24% of individuals who identify as Russian Orthodox report being “indifferent” to religious precepts, 64% say that they attempt to adhere to religious doctrine “some of the time”, and only 12% of followers report following religious law all of the time (Rose, 2002). Research on followers of

Russian Orthodoxy within Russia has also shown significant differences between “devout Orthodox”, those who identify as Russian Orthodox and attend church at least once a month, and “cultural Orthodox”, those who identify as Russian Orthodox but rarely (if ever) attend church, in basic attitudes towards the Russian Orthodox Church and its relevance to their lives (Marsh, 2005). Given the enormous variation within the category of those who identify as Russian Orthodox, it cannot be assumed that the role of religion will be identical in shaping the experiences and choices of all survivors of violence within the Russian Orthodox faith.

Battered women’s advocates have highlighted the importance of empowering survivors of IPVAV to make their own decisions regarding the termination or continuation of violent relationships and have cautioned service providers against pressuring women to leave relationships as the only viable option for addressing intimate partner violence (Peled, 2000). As survivors of violence have been disempowered by their abusers, a primary role of service providers is to re-establish a woman’s sense of personal autonomy and to facilitate her empowerment to make independent decisions and act on her own behalf. This principle becomes particularly important when working with women of the Russian Orthodox faith. Feminist advocates and service providers must recognize the potentially powerful role of religious doctrine in the lives of some Russian Orthodox women that dictates that leaving marital relationships, even if those relationships are violent, is not a viable option for some women. Although the official stance of the Russian Orthodox Church allows for the dissolution of marriages on the basis of “encroachment on the life or health of a spouse,” of which intimate partner violence would be an example, ending a violent marital relationship is not congruent with the belief system of some women of Russian Orthodox faith. Further, severe housing shortages in Russia dictate that many families must live in communal apartment arrangements, making it common for ex-spouses to be forced to continue to live together even after the dissolution of a relationship (Horne, 1999; Stickley, Tiofeeva, & Sparen, 2008). As lack of available and affordable housing creates structural barriers for women contemplating exiting violent relationships, many women quite simply have nowhere else to go even if they do not hold religious beliefs that prohibit the consideration of divorce. Feminist advocates and service providers must “start where the client is” and this means acknowledging that exiting abusive relationships is not a viable option for all women.

Working with women of Russian Orthodox faith, it is important that service providers decentralize the question of whether or not a woman should stay with her abusive partner and prioritize a consideration of a woman’s immediate and long-term safety. Battered women’s advocates have emphasized the primary importance of exploring safety

options with women and creating individualized safety plans that recognize women's unique circumstances, regardless of whether a woman is choosing to remain in or terminate a violent relationship (Stout & McPhail, 1998). Social service providers can play an important role in cross-training clergy in the Russian Orthodox Church about how to engage in such conversations with women in their congregation who are seeking religious guidance in response to relationship violence, how to conduct safety and lethality assessments to assess a women's current level of physical danger, and how to explore with women safety options to reduce the risk of physical harm to themselves and their children.

In addition, advocates and social service providers can play an important role in educating both the public and the clergy about the dynamics of IPVAW. As there has historically been no common language in Russia to describe the experience of intimate partner violence, with words like "battering" and "batterer" non-existent in the Russian context, it may be difficult for many women to discuss their experiences of violence with others due to the lack of a common language (Horne, 1999). Although feminist activists in Russia have attempted to create Russian terminology that is equivalent to that of terms like "domestic violence" used in the English context (*domashnee nasilie*), such language did not exist until the late 1990s (Johnson, 2007). By the early 2000s, newly developed crisis centers in Russia, in their attempts to create language that resonated more with the Russian populace, began framing the issue more so as *nasilie v sem'e* ("violence in the family") to emphasize the need for the protection of women and children within the domestic sphere. Such terminology, by framing the problem in terms of the need for the protection of women rather than the need for the empowerment of women, was intended to bolster public awareness of the issues of IPVAW in a way that did not overtly challenge entrenched gender traditionalism (Johnson, 2007). As such an approach to violence prevention is not inconsistent with Russian Orthodoxy but, rather, is consistent with belief systems regarding the role of husband as protector of his family, clergy can play a powerful role in the continued development of public education campaigns grounded in a gendered perspective to further public awareness of the unacceptability of IPVAW.

As IPVAW has been commonly constructed as a "private concern" in Russia, there have historically been few formal services to assist women in violent relationships. Indeed, the first crisis center specifically designed to assist victims of intimate partner violence did not appear in Moscow until 1992, suggesting that public acknowledgement of IPVAW as a social concern has been late in the making (Horne, 1999). Further, as previously noted, there is little infrastructure in place for enforcing the laws, with the police and criminal justice system commonly



treating intimate partner violence as a private matter to be resolved without the intrusion of the state (Crandall, Senturia, Sullivan, & Shiu-Thornton, 2005; Horne, 1999; Stickley et. al, 2008; Stickley, Timofeeva, & Sparen, 2008). Given that public discourses regarding issues of intimate partner violence have only recently emerged, it is still unknown what behaviors are commonly considered “violent” in the Russian context (Horne, 1999). By providing accurate information about the dynamics of violence in intimate relationships, advocates can help improve the ability of women to accurately identify violence in their lives and to take effective steps to promote their safety.

Given the historical lack of a common language to describe IPVAV, the shortage to non-existence of formal services for survivors of intimate partner violence, and the lack of formal state intervention in protecting women in violent relationships, it is unlikely that large numbers of women, particularly Russian Orthodox women, will seek help from formal institutions when confronted with violence. As such, improving the ability of the Russian Orthodox Church to accurately assess and intervene in circumstances of intimate partner violence is particularly critical. Given that the majority of men and women in Russia report a formal affiliation with the Russian Orthodox Church, the clergy is well positioned to be trained as “first responders” to assist women in violent relationships.

Clergy in the Russian Orthodox Church can play a powerful role in using gendered perspectives to challenge the abuse and misuse of religious doctrine to justify IPVAV. The official position of the Russian Orthodox Church is that men are prohibited from engaging in behaviors that “encroach on the life or health of the spouse” (Russian Orthodox Church, 2000, X: 3, ¶5). This must be interpreted by clergy as a proscription against the use of violence against women to maintain male authority. Clergy can educate both men and women that IPVAV is not sanctioned in the Russian Orthodox Church through illumination of key passages of scripture that highlight the unacceptable nature of violence in the home. Indeed, the protection of women within the domestic sphere does not challenge the gender traditionalism that lies at the core of Russian Orthodox faith but, rather, can be construed as an obligation of men under Russian Orthodoxy (Johnson, 2007). As such, clergy can frame violence prevention as consistent with the basic tenets of Orthodoxy as opposed to being in conflict with such tenets. Further, for women of faith who do elect to exit violent relationships, the clergy can provide non-judgmental spiritual support and guidance. An exploration of God’s forgiveness can be powerful in assisting women who do break the covenant of marriage but perceive their actions to be inconsistent with

religious doctrine to know that their actions will be forgiven by their higher power.

Given the prominence of the Russian Orthodox Church within Russia, clergy can be very powerful in lobbying the government to seriously address IPVAW as a public issue. Silence has historically surrounded the topic of intimate partner violence in Russia, isolating individual victims and constructing intimate partner violence as a “private trouble”. As the dominant religious institution in Russia, the Russian Orthodox Church can play a powerful role in lifting the veil of silence that surrounds intimate partner violence. Clergy within the church must work in conjunction with the government to raise public awareness of issues of IPVAW and to work toward coordinated community responses that promote a zero tolerance approach to male violence against women. As there is currently no national legislation in Russia that criminalizes intimate partner violence as a distinct criminal offence (Johnson, 2007), clergy can use their privileged position in relation to the state to put such legislation on the national agenda.

Finally, it has been argued that common multicultural approaches to cultural competency within social work have been grounded in a “celebration of differences” approach to understanding human diversity that provides little analysis of power and the ways in which different belief systems have been used to promote oppression (Gentlewarrior et al., 2008). Such an approach has resulted in some practitioners refusing to analyze the abuse and misuse of power in diverse religious orientations due to a fear that such an analysis is not consistent with culturally sensitive practice. Issues of violence, however, represent clear abuses of power that threaten the health, well-being, and basic human rights of women. As such, to ignore engaging in a critical discussion of the ways in which certain aspects of religious doctrine have been misused by some men in the Russian Orthodox Church as a justification for IPVAW is not only inconsistent with social work’s social justice mandate but also threatens the safety and physical integrity of women within the Russian Orthodox faith. To approach religious issues with a relativist approach that celebrates all interpretations of religious doctrines as equally valid, and therefore unquestionable, is to ignore the ways in which religious doctrines have been misappropriated and misinterpreted as a rationalization for gender-based violence. Social workers must begin to have these difficult dialogues if we are to incorporate a truly culturally competent approach to religion and spirituality in our practice.

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